

Don

When Wild Worlds Collide

It's September school holidays and a bunch of us is leaving the school in our school uniforms to walk down Hampton Street to Hampton Station where we'll catch the suburban train to the country train terminus at Spencer Street.

I'm carrying one suitcase and my bagpipes case: the others only one case each.

It's a familiar train ride into the City, and then the walk through the underground viaduct between platforms to the country platform. My train of six carriages, pulled by a diesel/electric engine is waiting ready to go. But this won't be for half an hour yet.

I'm taking Goulburn Valley line to Numurkah, via Seymour and Shepparton. The others are going on any of the many lines to leave Spencer Street: the Bendigo/Echuca line, or down to Gippsland, or up to Mildura or across the Western District on the Warrnambool line.

Unusually, I'm by myself to Goulburn Valley. Usually there are a couple who go to Shepparton, but this time they have been collected at school by their parents. Mum will be at Numurkah to collect me in the Chrysler Royal, (a big V8 and Dad's pride and joy), for the 20 minute drive home to the farm at Cobram East.

When I get in my carriage, the first compartment is full of school kids from other schools; boys and girls shouting to each other; not waiting for answers. They chide me for being from another school. But I don't want to verbally wrestle with them, I want to be by myself. I've just bought 'Gone with the Wind' on an impulse at the newsagents, using up some of the cash I was saving for coffee and sandwiches at Seymour Refreshment Rooms.

I walk down the narrow corridor to the far end of the carriage, checking each compartment, and enter the last one. Here, there are two seats left, unfortunately both the middle ones. I put my suitcase up on the luggage rack on the left, with the bagpipes case over the vacant seat on my right, and hope that no one else comes in, otherwise I'll have to move it.

I surreptitiously take in my fellow passengers.

Opposite me, on my left, against the window, under the brown and white Victorian Railways advertising poster for Marysville is a little old lady who is really old, probably about seventy I guess. She's in some non-descript greyish clothing that has a long skirt, and is wearing old-fashioned lace-up high heeled shoes. My Gran wears those, so this lady must be at least that old.

There's a lady on my left, but I can't really see who she is, but she doesn't seem all that much older than me.

Directly opposite me is a vacant seat, and I hope it stays that way. Over it is another advertising brochure, this time of Lorne and it's magnificent guesthouse.

In the corridor corner opposite me under an advertising photo of Mount Buffalo, is a round-faced tubby man wearing a dirty t-shirt with spots down the front. His week old stubble and lack of teeth did not endear him to me.

I wondered, again, as I always do on country trains, why the railways seem to advertise places which don't have a railway station. All destinations in the photographs in this compartment require a bus ride for at least an hour from Healesville, Bright or Colac respectively. Not really the thing for railways to advertise, I thought.

He asks what's in the smaller case I've put up over the vacant seat beside him. When I tell him bagpipes, he started singing softly to himself the Andy Williams hit tune, 'Scottish Soldier', which had recently been a number one single. I was dreading him starting in on 'Donald Where's your Trewsers', then asking me what my name was. He wouldn't have been so bad if he could have stayed in tune, so I was relieved when he stopped off to say that he knew a woman once who lived next door to him who played in a pipe band. There weren't many of them though. A street parade would be six pipers and two drummers.

He also knew a man from Glasgow who had joined the Royal Navy for the war, as a stoker, but got two broken legs when his ship went down. He's now got one of those Soldier Settlement farms at Yarroweyah, and he has to use crutches to walk, the new aluminium ones, which only come to the elbows. I nodded, but didn't tell him that I knew who he meant, it was Bob Hosie, a good friend of my dads, and fellow Board Member at the Cheese factory. He then caught sight of the man on my right, who was humming gently to himself.

It was easy to recognise as 'Michael row the boat ashore', as he slowly strummed on his stringless ukulele. This man could actually keep in tune, but the harmony parts sounded a little odd by themselves. He was dressed neatly in Levi's with a four inch turnups, sandshoes and a Levi's long sleeved shirt with the cuffs turned back. Even though he moved his fret hand on the uke appropriately for the cords, his fingers were only stumps, but the thumb was ok though. He must have worked as a butcher, or in a saw mill, I thought.

The fellow opposite asked if he knew anything else, perhaps Johnny O'Keefe's 'Right Now'. 'It's got a decent beat, and you can sing it real loud', which he commenced himself immediately, holding nothing in reserve: 'Right Now-ow-ow-ow-ow, yes I need you and how, now I can't live without your-er lah-ah-ah-ah-huv.'

The old lady against the window opposite me, suddenly said, very loudly, in a high squeaky voice, 'Oh, give it a rest will you. I didn't come here to have my ear drums ruined.' Unfortunately, this was possibly not the most tactful

thing to say at the beginning of what was to me a five hour journey. 'My husband would have had something to say about your noise.'

Suddenly the sliding door into the compartment opened and another older woman arrived, somewhat breathless, who immediately lost her balance and was plumped down into the vacant seat opposite me by the jerking of the train as it started off. She was about my mother's age I guessed, dressed in a bright orange and pink dress with a scooped neck.

That also put an end to the plump man's conversation, so as it was getting dark, I settled down with my book, until the Conductor arrived to check tickets, sometime after Broadmeadows.

The man on my right was still humming hit tunes to himself. I could just make out Elvis Presley's 'Wooden Heart' and Andy Stewart's 'Scottish Soldier', but thank goodness this didn't prompt the plump man to start quizzing me again.

The old lady against the window opposite had gone to sleep, and the lady on my left was engrossed in a 'Women's Weekly'. I couldn't see her too well, but she certainly smelt heavily of perfume.

Then the lady opposite leaned forward towards me and asked if I could look after Sir Tibbett for her. 'You know, my cat. I've got to go to the loo'. And she pulled from her large handbag, a tiny kitten.

'I suppose so', I said, as the small bundle was thrust into my hands. What else was I to do? Were cats permitted on trains? Would I get thrown off? Best I just hide it until she gets back.

It seemed an interminable time until she returned, and I was beginning to think that I would have to forego my coffee and sandwiches at Seymour Refreshment Rooms if she did not get back soon.

Eventually she returned, and stooping down to collect the cat, let the front of her dress fall away, and to my horror, I could see right down to her belly button with her small breasts to each side.

I couldn't breathe for a couple of minutes after she sat down, and did not dare to look at her. I was afraid that she would wink at me, so I concentrated on what Scarlett O'Hara was doing.

The lady on my left then got up abruptly and went off, apparently to the toilet. When she came back, she was wearing a tu-tu over her dress, and was visibly upset. She settled down in tears and curled up foetal position in her seat.

So, as we were getting near Seymour, I got up and went down the corridor to the doors of the carriage, ready to jump down and be early for the queue. The train stopped for only 15 minutes here, and there was always a rush to get the milky coffee, and plate of sandwiches, always Peck's paste, cheese and pickle, ham and relish and curried egg and lettuce. I was third in line, and having been served went back to one of the tall round tables to eat and drink standing up.

The public address system suddenly burst into life, and I could just discern within the cacophony, the words 'Shepparton', 'Numurkah' and 'Departing'. So I wandered back to my seat and started reading again.

When the train started, neither the untidy tubby man, nor the lady to my left who'd been wearing the tu-tu, had taken their seats.

'Never mind', I thought, 'they'll be back soon. They've probably found someone to talk to'.

But I was wrong, at Nagambie the train stopped for an unusually long period of time, and I was beginning to wonder if there had been a car accident at a level crossing. But no, a policeman appeared and asked if we were 'acquainted with either Mr Snodgrass or Miss Violin'. The four of us shook our heads, and asked what was going on.

'Well, they jumped together from the pedestrian bridge in front of this train just as it was departing Seymour, and seeing as they are now both deceased, we are trying to find their relatives. The train could be stopped here for some time.'

Well, I couldn't contact Mum, and could only hope that the Station Master at Numurkah would pass the information on, and make sure that those who were waiting would be made comfortable in the Ladies Lounge.

Another policeman eventually returned, and silently removed the luggage of our two past companions.

Without any further information, the train eventually pulled out of Nagambie, and headed off to Shepparton and Numurkah.

It wasn't until I read 'The Age' the next day that I got an inkling of what had happened.

Apparently the tubby man hadn't been out of gaol long, and had obviously been living rough, but had managed to make contact with his ex-wife. That was the lady who had been on my left. She had at one time been a ballet dancer but had suffered a major nervous condition after breaking an ankle falling over a stray cat. They were travelling north to seek a new life on the orchards at Shepparton, which was her hometown. Unfortunately, the appearance of Sir Tibbett had renewed old difficulties, and as there seemed to be no real prospects for them to start a life again together, they took what was to them the only option.